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November 15, 1961

Vietnam 30

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

So many people have offered their opinions on South Vietnam that more may not be helpful. But the other day at the swimming pool you asked me what I thought and here it is.

A. We should now agree to send about one division when needed for military action inside South Vietnam.

1. I believe we should commit limited U.S. combat units, if necessary for military purposes (not for morale), to help save South Vietnam. A victory here would produce great effects all over the world. A defeat would hurt, but not much more than a loss of South Vietnam with the levels of U. S. help now committed or planned.

2. I believe our willingness to make this commitment, if necessary, should be clearly understood, by us and by Diem, before we begin the actions now planned. I think without that decision the whole program will be half-hearted. With this decision I believe the odds are almost even that the commitment will not have to be carried out. This conclusion is, I believe, the inner conviction of your Vice President, your Secretaries of State and Defense, and the two heads of your special mission, and that is why I am troubled by your most natural desire to act on other items now, without taking the troop decision. Whatever the reason, this has now become a sort of touchstone of our will.

3. I believe the actions now planned, plus the basic decision to put in limited combat troops if necessary, are all that is currently wanted. I would not put in a division for morale purposes. I'd put it in later, to fight if need be. After all, Admiral Felt himself recommended, on balance, against combat troops less than a month ago. It will be time enough to put them in when our new Commander says what he would do with them.

4. The use of force up to a total of 20-25,000, inside Vietnam, is not on the same footing as the larger forces that might become necessary if the Vietminh move to direct invasion. I would not make the larger decision on a war against North Vietnam today.

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By <i>msm</i>	NARS, Date <i>5/24/84</i>

B. We can manage the political consequences of this line of action.

5. I believe South Vietnam stands, internally and externally, on a footing wholly different from Laos. Laos was never really ours after 1954. South Vietnam is and wants to be. Laotians have fought very little. South Vietnam troops are not U. S. Marines, but they are usable. This makes the opinion problem different at home and abroad.

6. I believe the Jorden Report, the exchange of letters, and Stevenson and Rusk, can coolly justify this basic line of action, not to all the world, but to an effective fraction. I do not expect that these actions will lead to rapid escalation of the conflict, since they remain essentially on our side of the line, and since the Communists do not want that kind of test.

7. I think this solution will put a serious strain on our position in Laos, but that has always been a bad bargain. My advice would be to give the game promptly to Souvanna and hope for the best, meanwhile holding hard to our new course in South Vietnam. Souvanna may make noises against that action, but I don't think he'll fight or be overthrown by the PL for a while.

C. The role of your senior advisers to Diem is crucial.

8. Next only to the basic decision, I put the role of the men to act for you in South Vietnam. I now accept, after some doubts, the Rusk-McNamara view that the man in charge of the war must be a military man. His quality thus becomes decisive, and Nolting should be judged as his complement, not as your head man in South Vietnam. McGarr has been inadequate. All the pressures will be in favor of a solid, virtuous, not quite first-rate senior officer. You need a man chosen with inspiration by you and McNamara personally; his rank can be arranged.

9. In addition to his personal qualities, this senior man will need the full confidence and support of Diem. No one action can guarantee this relation, but our present efforts with Diem should be directed toward strengthening

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the role of the U. S. military commander in every possible way. How this should be done is a matter of tactics -- but it should not be left to faith, hope and charity.

D. In Summary: two changes are needed in the cable to Nolting.

10. If you accept this argument, the cable to Nolting should include:

(1) a statement that U. S. combat troops will be put into South Vietnam when and if the U. S. military recommend it on persuasive military grounds for internal action.

(2) a much clearer statement that Diem must take U. S. military counsel on a wholly new basis.

McG. B.

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